

# Early English Hymns of the Pre-Wesleyan Period

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## I

The Reformation in England took in many respects a very different course from that upon the Continent. In Germany, France, Switzerland, and the Netherlands the revolt against Rome was initiated by men who sprang from the ranks of the people. Notwithstanding the complication of motives which drew princes and commoners, ecclesiastics and laymen, into the rebellion,<sup>1</sup> the movement was primarily religious. It was first a protest against abuses; next, a demand for free privilege in the Gospel; and was followed by restatements of belief and the establishment of new forms of worship. Political changes followed in the train of the religious revolution because in most instances there was such close alliance between the secular powers and the papacy that allegiance to the former was not compatible with resistance to the latter.

In England this process was reversed: political separation preceded the religious changes; it was the alliance between the government and the papacy that was first to break. The emancipation from the supremacy of Rome was accomplished at a single stroke by the crown itself, and that not upon moral grounds or doctrinal disagreement but solely for political advantage. In spite of tokens of spiritual unrest, there was no sign of a disposition on the part of any considerable number of the English people to sever their fealty to the Church of Rome when, in 1534, Henry VIII issued a royal edict repudiating the papal authority, and a submissive Parliament decreed that the "king, our sovereign lord, his heirs and successors of this realm, shall be taken, accepted, and reputed the only supreme head on earth of the Church

of England." No doctrinal change was involved in this procedure; there was no implied admission of freedom of conscience or religious toleration. The mediaeval conception of the necessity of religious unanimity among all subjects of the State was rigorously asserted.

The old Germanic spirit of liberty and individual determination, always especially strong in England, was however certain to assert itself when the great European intellectual awakening of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had taken hold of the mass of the people, and it might have been foreseen after Luther's revolt that England would soon throw herself into the arms of the Reformation. With the passage of the Act of Supremacy the Catholic and Protestant parties began to align themselves for conflict. Henry VIII at first showed himself favorable to the Protestants, inclining to the acceptance of the Bible as the final authority instead of the decrees and traditions of the Church. After the Catholic rebellion of 1536, however, the king changed his policy and with the passage of the Six Articles which decreed the doctrine of transsubstantiation, the celibacy of the clergy, the value of private masses, the necessity for auricular confession, he began a bloody persecution which ended only with his death.

The boy king Edward VI, who reigned from 1547 to 1553, had been won over to Protestantism by Archbishop Cranmer, and with his accession reforms in doctrine and ritual went on rapidly. Parliament was again rendered subservient and a modified Lutheranism took possession of the English Church. The people were taught from the English Bible; the Book of Common Prayer took the place of the Messal and Brevi-

ary; the Mass, compulsory celibacy of the clergy, and worship of images, were abolished.

Under Mary the old religion and forms were reenacted and a persecution memorable for the martyrdoms of Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer and others was carried on with ruthless severity, but without weakening the cause of the reformed faith. Elizabeth, whose long reign made her the guiding figure in English religious life from 1558 to 1603, had no pronounced religious convictions, but under the stress of European political conditions she became of necessity a protector of the Protestant cause. The reformed service was restored, and from Elizabeth's day the Church of England has rested securely upon the Constitutions of Edward VI.

## II

The revised liturgy and musical service of the Church of England had not long been in operation when they encountered adversaries far more bitter and formidable than Catholics. The Puritans, who strove to effect a radical overturning in ecclesiastical affairs, to reduce worship to a prosaic simplicity, and also to set up a more democratic form of church government, violently assailed the established Church as Papist. The contest between the antagonistic principles, Ritualism *vs* Puritanism, and the rival forms, Anglicanism *vs* Presbyterianism, broke out under Elizabeth, but was repressed by her strong hand only to increase under the weaker James I and to culminate with the overthrow of Charles I and the temporary triumph of Puritanism.

The antipathy of the Puritan party to everything formal, ceremonial, and artistic in worship was powerfully promoted if not originally instigated by John Calvin, the chief fountain head of the Puritan doctrine and polity. The extraordinary personal ascendancy of Calvin was shown not only in the adoption of his theological system by so large a section of the Protestant world, but also in the fact that his opinions concerning the ideal method of public worship were treated with almost equal reverence, and in many localities have held sway

down to the present time. Conscious perhaps to excess of certain harmful tendencies in ritualism, he proclaimed that everything formal and artistic in worship was an offense to God. Instruments of music and trained choirs were to him abomination, and the only musical observance permitted in the sanctuary was the singing by the congregation of metrical translations of the Psalms.

Metrical versions were substituted for the chanted prose versions of Psalms for the reason, no doubt, that a congregation, as a rule, cannot sing in perfect unity of cooperation except in metre and in musical forms in which one note is set to one syllable. But, one is tempted to ask, why the Psalms alone? Why suppress the free utterance of the believers in hymns of faith and hope? The rise of an English hymnody corresponding to that of Germany was, by this very circumstance, delayed for more than one hundred and fifty years. English religious song-books were exclusively Psalm-books, down to the eighteenth century. Poetic activity among the nonconformists consisted in translations of the Psalms in metre, or rather, versions of the existing translations in the English Bible. The singular passion in that period for putting everything into rhyme and metre, sometimes produced grotesque results, such as the paraphrase of "Paradise Lost," in rhymed stanzas.

There are few, if any, English hymns to be found before the beginning of the seventeenth century. To the fifteenth century belong a few hymns addressed to the Virgin and Christ. These have been edited from the Lambert MSS. No. 853, by Mr. Furnivall, for the Early English Text Society. One of these, on "The Sweetness of Jesus" is very tender and beautiful; another on "The Love of Jesus" likens love to a fire which cleanses us from sin, and joins man to God. But since worship had not yet come to be offered through the vernacular, it is all but certain that such hymns were only for private reading and meditation.

Before the seventeenth century, there is much noble sacred English poetry; but

there are few, if any, hymns capable of being sung in the congregation. And these poems, as it has been well said, were "too subtle and fanciful" ever to come home to the hearts of the people. They were written for a choice few to enjoy. They were full of those subtle allusions, half the pleasure of which consists in the ingenuity required to understand as well as to invent them. Such hymns could never be sung, like Luther's by little children at Christmas, or as a nation's battle-song; nor could they, as could Gerhardt's, distil peace at moments when heart and flesh failed and mortal effort was impossible, when the soul had lost its power to cling to anything. The verses of this period bear witness to the poetical power of the writers rather than to the faith of the times. This appears true especially when the general ignorance of the people of that time is taken into account. The spread of education in our time has, of course, quickened intelligence and made men capable of appreciating a style of hymn which in earlier times was beyond them. This will account for the presence in our hymnals of verses known in early times only to those of the literary class. Indeed, the really hymn-singing age was not yet, and did not begin till the time of Watts.

### III

The hymn "O Lord, turn not Thy face from me," attributed by some to John Mardley, and by others to John Marchant, and belonging to about the middle of the 16th century is probably the earliest really English hymn to be found in present-day hymnals. Sir Egerton Brydges is inclined to attribute some versions of the Psalms in Steinhold and Hopkins signed *M*, to Mardley. The hymn to which we referred is not without merit. Here is the original:

O Lord turn not Thy face from me,  
Who lie in woeful state,  
Lamenting all my woeful life,  
Before Thy mercy-gate.

A gate which opens wide to those  
That do lament their sins;  
Shut not that gate against me, Lord,  
But let me enter in.

And call me not to strict account  
How I have sojourned here;  
For then my guilty conscience knows  
How vile I shall appear.

So come I to Thy mercy gate,  
Where mercy doth abound,  
Imploring pardon for my sin,  
To heal my deadly wound.

Mercy, good Lord, mercy I ask,  
This is the total sum;  
For mercy, Lord, is all my suit:  
O, let Thy mercy come.

George Sandys is a much more notable contributor to the hymnody of the early seventeenth century. Dryden called him "the best versifier of his age." He wrote, "A Paraphrase Upon the Psalms of David, and Upon the Hymns Dispersed Throughout the Old and New Testaments," and poetical versions of the Song of Solomon, Job, and Ecclesiastes. The most notable of his renderings is of the 61st Psalm, beginning, "Happy sons of Israel...."

In 1623, George Wither had brought out, under a patent from King James the first approach to a real hymn book of the Church of England. Wither's hymn-book, while it was made up partly of "canonical" poems rhyming about as well as they could be rhymed, was made up partly of his own original compositions; and as he was now living in an age of "Psalms in meeter" for religious song exclusively, he had small success with the hymn-book. The people were not ready for the free hymns, and he was not himself ready to write successful ones. This is not that Wither did not write good verses. He did write good religious poetry, but his poems are not quite hymns.

Of no small significance, however, is Wither as a hymnist. He had the taste to see that the metrical Psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins were poor poetry and he knew that something better was possible.<sup>1</sup> The other promising thing about Wither was the strenuousness and storminess of his life. He knew deprivation and hardship and imprisonment. The main reason that Wither, in his two best books of hymns,

<sup>1</sup>See his *Scholar's Purgatory* on the Psalms.

did not have one hymn such as Ambrose, the Bernards, Luther or Wesley could write was that he lacked what may be termed 'hymn sense'. He had no popular judgment to pass sympathetically upon his efforts and to furnish the communal feeling without which it seems impossible for a good hymn to be produced. So the first hymn book—not the Psalm book—of the Church of England failed, though it was approved and granted patent by the king himself.

Three of Wither's best hymns are: "Come, O Come, with pious lays"; "Behold the Sun that seemed but now"; and "Lord, living here we are." This last is a hymn for the anniversary of marriage, quaint and beautiful:

Lord, living here are we,  
As fast united yet  
As when our hands and hearts by Thee  
Together first were knit!

And in a thankful song  
Now sing we will Thy praise,  
For that Thou dost as well prolong  
Our loving as our days.

But let these frailties prove  
Affection's exercise,  
And that discretion teach our love  
Which wins the noblest prize.

So time which wears away  
And ruins all things else,  
Shall fix our love on Thee for aye,  
In whom perfection dwells.

The following is an illustration of Wither's paraphrasing of Scripture:

The Father likewise God and Lord;  
And God and Lord the Son;  
And God and Lord the Holy Ghost,  
Yet God and Lord but One.  
For though each Person by Himself  
We God and Lord confess,  
Yet Christian faith forbids that we  
Three Gods or Lords profess.

Although Elizabeth had authorized the singing of "hymns and such-like songs of worship" in the churches and cathedrals, it was not until the Restoration that there was any considerable singing of native hymns in modern England. All through this stretch of English history there was

much singing of the measures of Sternhold and Hopkins, and later of Tate and Brady. At the same time there were many religious songs written and set to music, but the singing of these songs in the Churches was a rare occurrence. Many of the fine Elizabethan songs of piety were set to music. Sidney, Raleigh, Donne and Herrick doubtless sang their quite lovely songs, but not in assemblages of public worship.

Sir Thomas Browne, the well-known author of the "Religio Medici" is known in religious circles even better by his lovely Evening Hymn, 'The Night is Come; like to the day,' than he is by his famous book. This hymn probably contains the germ out of which Bishop Ken's far better known "Evening Hymn" grew.

Browne's Hymn reads as follows:

The night has come like to the day;  
Depart not thou, great God, away;  
Let not my sins, black as the night,  
Eclipse the lustre of the light.

Guard me 'gainst those watchful foes  
Whose eyes are open while mine close;  
Let no dream my head infest,  
But such as Jacob's temples blest.

Sleep is a death; I make me try  
By sleeping what it is to die!  
And as gently lay my head  
On my grave as on my bed.

Howe'er I rest, great God, let me  
Awake again at last with thee;  
And thus assured, behold I lie  
Securely, or to wake or die.

These are my drowsy days; in vain  
I do not wake to sleep again;  
O Come, that hour when I shall never  
Sleep again, but wake forever.

The lyrical poets of the Jacobean and Carolean period count George Herbert as their chief glory. The immediate circle surrounding Herbert may almost be said to constitute a family party, linked together by ties of blood or friendship or literary tastes and presided over by the genial and kindly fisherman, Izaak Walton. It is rather a wonderful group, including as it does, besides Herbert himself, Donne and Wotton, Cra-

shaw and Bishop King, Dean Farrar and Bishop Ken.

The age in which these men lived is itself remarkable in the annals of English literature. The years of Izaak Walton's lifetime, which spanned almost a century, saw the production of the Authorized Version of the Bible, of Bacon's *Essays*, of Shakespeare's great masterpieces, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and of Milton's *Lycidas* and *Paradise Lost*. It was the time when the common speech of the people reached its zenith of beauty, redolent of nature and the open air and rich in natural, poetical feeling. The devotional poetry of the age is marked by a splendor of workmanship which has never been equalled before or since. Some of it is almost too rich for human nature's daily food, "sweet even to a sense of faintness," bewitching in its jewelled beauty; but this excess of ornamentation is nearly always atoned for by the devoutness and sincerity of the writer's lines.

The most familiar of these writers is no doubt George Herbert. Nothing is finer in the English language than his book of verses entitled *The Temple*. Izaak Walton tells us how fond Herbert was of singing to his lute or viol his own hymns, but unfortunately very few of them ever found their way into the service of public worship. Such hymns as:

1. King of Glory, King of Peace.
2. Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life.
3. My Joy, My Life, My Crown.
4. Throw Away Thy Rod.
5. Love Bade Me Welcome.
6. Let All the World in Every Corner Sing.

The last hymn which should be in constant use must suffice as illustrative material:

Let all the world in every corner sing,  
My God and King.  
The heavens are not too high;  
His praise may thither fly.  
The earth is not too low;  
His praises there may grow.  
Let all the world in every corner sing,  
My God and King!

Let all the world in every corner sing,  
My God and King!

The Church with psalms must shout,  
No door can keep them out;  
But above all, the heart  
Must bear the longest part.  
Let all the world in every corner sing,  
My God and King!

Robert Herrick is better known by the secular poetry of his *Hesperides*, than by his contributions to sacred song, which are included in *Noble Numbers*, but his "Litany to the Holy Spirit," though containing verses which are not suited to public worship, as will be seen below, yet is in parts tender and beautiful.

In the hour of my distress,  
When temptations me oppress,  
And when I my sins confess,  
Sweet Spirit, comfort me!

When I lie within my bed,  
Sick in heart and sick in head,  
And with doubts discomfited,  
Sweet Spirit, comfort me!

When the house doth sigh and weep,  
And the world is drowned in sleep,  
Yet mine eyes the watch do keep,  
Sweet Spirit, comfort me!

When the artless doctor sees  
No one hope, but of his fees,  
And his shill runs on the leas,  
Sweet Spirit, comfort me!<sup>2</sup>

John Milton translated nine of the Psalms in meter. They are remarkable for fidelity to the original as well as for their poetic beauty. The best known of these is of the 136th: "Let us with a gladsome mind." Not less worthy are his renderings of parts of the 82nd, 85th, and 86th Psalms: of the 86th: "The Lord will come and not be slow," and of the 84th Psalm, "How lovely are Thy dwellings fair." These are so fine in quality and distinctive in character, as to deserve rank as original compositions.

It seems a misrepresentation of Jeremy Taylor, to quote him as a hymn poet; but he wrote a volume, *Festival Hymns*, which appeared in 1665. Not one of them is even a moderately good hymn. A master of English prose, a man distinguished for sense,

<sup>2</sup> There are eight more stanzas.

and a saint for piety and goodness, he never attained to true hymnody. The first lines of his "Hymn for Christmas Day" show how a verse may be devout, lyrical poetry and still not be a hymn: it is a "readable lyric," not a singing one.

Awake, my soul and come away!  
Put on thy best array,  
Lest if thou longer stay,  
Thou lose some minutes of so blest a day.  
Go, run  
And bid good morrow to the sun.

Contemporary with these hymn writers was Henry Purcell, considered by many to have been England's greatest composer. In addition to his contribution as a secular composer, he developed the anthem, which was a form combining the ancient choral motet and the German cantata. Since he is not known as a hymn writer, and since the consideration of the anthem would require another study of the length of this one, we have purposely omitted it from this article. It should be borne in mind, however, that the anthem had a development parallel to that of the hymn, and that it was influenced by the same religious, political and literary currents which affected the growth of the English hymn.

It required Ken, Watts, and Wesley to develop the hymn, but it took a hymn-minded England to develop Ken, Watts and Wesley. Richard Baxter produced a metrical version of the Psalms, which was published after his death, and also two volumes of poetry. From the latter, two hymns have passed into collections. "Lord, it belongs not to my care," is part of a larger hymn consisting of eight verses of eight lines each, called "The Covenant and Confidence of Faith." It is so evidently the utterance of the heart, and so tenderly expressed, that it has won for itself a wide and deserved popularity among all sections of the Church. The finest verse is the one which reads as follows:

Christ leads me through no darker rooms  
Than He went through before;  
He that into God's Kingdom comes  
Must enter by His door.

"Ye holy angels bright," a Psalm of praise, has merit, but lacks the distinctiveness and individuality of the former.

With Crossman and Ken in the English Church, and Austin who had left it for the Roman, we may begin that succession of modern English hymn writers which has never failed up to the present time. Samuel Crossman was one of the ejected ministers of 1662, but afterwards he conformed, and became Dean of Bristol. In 1664 he published *The Young Man's Monitor*, to which was appended *The Young Man's Meditation*, or some few sacred poems upon select subjects and Scriptures. These are in the Psalm metres and are clearly hymns. Two of these hymns were brought to notice by Lord Selborne and are found in current hymnbooks. Crossman's work suggests Puritan, rather than Catholic, influences.

A striking group of thirty-nine hymns appeared in John Austin's *Devotions, in the Ancient Way of Offices; with Psalms, Hymns and Prayers, for every day in the week, and every holiday in the year*. It was a most influential book, of which four editions preserved its Roman form, and which, modified twice for Anglican use, was reprinted as late as 1856. Except for two or three from Crashaw, the hymns are original, and give Austin a distinguished place among the earliest hymn writers. There is ample evidence that these fervid hymns found immediate acceptance beyond the bounds of Austin's own Church. As we shall see, they were at once appropriated by those endeavoring to introduce Hymnody into the Church of England.

Thomas Ken is of special interest to us today. This writer, the most eminent of the non-juring bishops, was educated at Winchester College and at Oxford, and ordained in 1662. After ten years, in 1672 he returned to Winchester as a prebendary of the Cathedral, Chaplain to the Bishop, and fellow of Winchester College. Here he spent several years, composing hymns and preparing a *Manual of Prayers for the Use of the Scholars of Winchester College* which appeared in 1674. In 1679 he was appointed by Charles II as chaplain to Princess Mary, but he incurred the dis-

pleasure of William of Orange and returned to England. In 1684 he became Bishop of Bath and Weels; and in 1688 when James II reissued the 'Declaration of Indulgence,' he was one of the seven bishops who refused to publish it. At the Revolution he took the position that, having sworn allegiance to James, he could not conscientiously take the oath to William; therefore, he lost his bishopric and was imprisoned. After his release, he spent his last years in retirement at Longleat, in Wiltshire.

In his *Manual*, Ken gave the injunction, "Be sure to sing the Morning and Evening Hymn in your chamber devoutly." The two hymns thus referred to: "Awake, My Soul, and with the sun," and "Glory to Thee, my God, this night," were not included in the *Manual* until 1694, but they were evidently used by the students soon after Ken became fellow of Winchester College. They show not so much the influence of Puritan antecedents as of the Roman Catholic Breviary. Each consists of several stanzas and both concluded with the doxology that is now known throughout Christendom, and is sung every Sabbath by millions of voices.

Glory to Thee, my God, this night  
For all the blessings of the light;  
Keep me, O keep me, King of Kings,  
Beneath thine own Almighty wings.

Forgive me, Lord, for thy dear Son,  
The ill which I this day have done;  
That with the world, myself and thee,  
I, ere I sleep, at peace may be.

Teach me to live, that I may dread  
The grave as little as my bed;  
Teach me to die, that so I may  
Rise glorious at the Judgment Day.

Be thou my Guardian while I sleep,  
Thy watchful station near me keep;  
My heart with love celestial fill,  
And guard me from th' approach of ill.

Lord, let my soul forever share  
The bliss of thy paternal care;  
'Tis heaven on earth, 'tis heaven above,  
To see thy face, and sing thy love.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,  
Praise Him all creatures here below,  
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host,  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

It should be noted in conclusion that the development of the English hymn in this period was conditioned by the peculiar circumstances which attended the English Reformation. The fact that the leadership of the movement from Rome was in the hands of political leaders, instead of the hands of men rising from the ranks, plus the fact of the division of the reformed Church into two violently hostile camps, profoundly affected the hymnody of the time. In consequence we find no writer of religious song in the England of the period comparable to Luther, Gerhardt or Tersteegen. The compromise which was finally effected within the Anglican Church was such that there was an arid period of nearly a century and a half, during which the torch of hymn writing was passed on to a new dissenting movement, that which produced Watts and Wesley.